

Northern California refinery fire spreads toxic fumes

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A fire broke out at Chevron's Richmond, California refinery at about 6:00 pm local time. As twin 40-foot pillars of flame rose into the air, residents were issued a shelter-in-place warning to avoid the noxious fumes.

The fire was contained but continued burning into Tuesday morning, spewing an unknown amount of toxins into the air. Hundreds of people sought hospital care after experiencing symptoms related to the fumes.

The fire began at the refinery's only crude distillation unit (CDU), where a diesel leak forced workers to evacuate. The diesel, heated above its ignition point as part of the distillation process, burst into flames shortly thereafter. Three workers were injured and treated on site.

The thick, black smoke from the fire is expected to contain all the common toxins that result from burning crude oil, including sulfur dioxide, benzopyrene, and soot. The results of air quality tests both up and downwind from the fire are expected on Wednesday.

The public warning to remain indoors was issued to the cities of Richmond, North Richmond, San Pablo, and El Cerrito totaling over 150,000 people. Three nearby BART stations were also closed but reopened later that night. Residents in the area reported a widespread smell of burning plastic.

Hospitals in the area reported over 200 emergency room visits from people with respiratory problems and eye irritation. Although most were released after seeing a doctor, a steady stream of new complaints is expected.

This is not the first time Chevron's refinery has caused catastrophe. In March 1994, an explosion due to a mechanical malfunction released numerous toxins. In 1999 the smoke from an explosion and fire sent over 1,200 people the hospital due to breathing difficulty and eye irritation.

The problems are not limited to Chevron either. Also in 1999 an explosion at another refinery on the San Pablo Bay, Tosco's Avon refinery, killed four workers and seriously injured another.

Five years ago, the same CDU at Chevron's refinery caught fire and burned for 10 hours, forcing the refinery to idle for months as repairs were made. Fears of another extended drop in production sent Los Angeles benchmark gasoline premiums up by about 25 cents. This could potentially push the price at the pump to over \$4 a gallon.

Chevron's Richmond refinery is the largest in Northern California, with an output of 245,000 barrels per day and over 1,200 employees. It was built in 1902 by Standard Oil and has been an important source of West Coast gasoline ever since. Any extended closure would have economic implications throughout the state.

Chevron has used its local economic weight to minimize taxes and fines. In 2009, Chevron reached a \$28 million settlement with Richmond over assessed utility taxes. The details of how much was actually owed were kept secret by both the city and company in order to protect "trade secrets."

Last year Chevron was fined a mere \$170,000 for air quality violations over a five year period. At issue was the improper monitoring of potentially toxic gases. By comparison, the value of the crude oil that the refinery processes each day is over \$22 million.

Most recently, in December last year, Chevron sued Contra Costa County, claiming that the company was being overcharged on property taxes. The county had assessed the refinery's worth to be \$3 billion, but Chevron contended it was only worth \$1.8 billion in 2007 and \$1.15 billion in 2009. If Chevron had won the case, the county would have had to refund \$60 million to them. That year, Chevron had a net income of \$26.9

billion.

Among local residents there is a broad feeling that both Chevron and the local government care more about corporate profits and tax income than residents' safety. Ken Workman who has lived near the refinery since 1987 told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "The wind never blows that smoke to Marin County, now does it? They made sure of that. I think it's intentional that they don't protect us."

Richmond, just across the bay from Marin, has a per capita income of only \$22,839, compared to Marin County's per capita income of \$51,045.



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